

Hessed – Lovingkindness The River That Still Flows From Eden

Rosh Hashanah is the Anniversary of Creation... and there is a link from that distant event to the present moment, every present moment. The Zohar, the great work of Kabbalah, sees this link written into the very story of Creation in the Torah, where it is written...

8. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden from the east, and He placed there the man whom He had formed.

ח וַיִּטַע יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים גֶּן בְּעֵדֶן מִקְדָּם וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁם אֶת הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר:

9. And the Lord God caused to sprout from the ground every tree pleasant to see and good to eat, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.

ט וַיִּצְמַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן הָאֲדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נְחֻמָּד לְמַרְאֵה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הַגֶּן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע:

10. And a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it separated and became four heads.

י וְנָהָר יֵצֵא מֵעֵדֶן לְהַשְׁקוֹת אֶת הַגֶּן וּמִשָּׁם יִפְרָד וְהָיָה לְאַרְבָּעָה רִאשִׁים:

Yotzei—not *yatza*—a verb in present tense that says the river *flows* out of Eden to water the garden. *Still today* the river is flowing from the Garden! What river could that be? For the Kabbalists, it is lovingkindness. God created the world in *hessed*, lovingkindness, and it is *lovingkindness that still flows* through the world, which sustains all life.

This “river” that continues to flow from the Garden of Eden is the river of *hessed*, and you can feel it in your veins, when you love the stranger. *Hessed* is the unending flow of lovingkindness that courses through our bodies and conceives new life; that flows between us in acts of *gemilut hasadim*; that flows in Nature, in rains that nourish the earth, in the capillary action that sends water and nutrients coursing up the stalks of plants and trunks of trees. We can recognize the *hessed* that still runs through this world and that us and that sustains the world. And we can also recognize that *hessed* gets blocked up.

Within us. In relationships between friends and strangers. In nature. Our empathy shuts down, and we end up with polluted water systems, oil clogged shores, and an economic system where money stops flowing in all directions. Our creativity gets stuck and we find ourselves annoyed by the shortcomings in how we do things but cynical about the value imagination and problem-solving might have, so we deal with it... If capitalism didn’t both make sure that our items wore out and also that young entrepreneurs invented better versions of blenders, can openers, and carkeys all the time, we’d be *miserable*.

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We come on Rosh Hashanah to reconnect to the river that is still flowing and to reopen the channels that connect us to Eden and our own creative, compassionate potential. The flow within us is a reminder that we are not severed from that source... but rather connected with some kind of umbilical cord to the original creativity and lovingkindness that conceived the world (on this day—*hayom harat olam*; this was the day the world was conceived—not given birth to, but conceived, in that original letting go, breaking of the vessels in kabbalah, utter giving forth of potential life).

And we tap into this energy to unblock the channels within us where life-nourishing *hessed* gets stuck—in unresolved hurts, in scars that our habits leave, in despair that takes up lodging inside us, in self-doubt, in cynicism, in isolation, in complacency, in laziness. Wake up! The shofar tells us... It is the existential cry to “dig ourselves out of that early burial” in *shmutz* as Taylor Swift advises us “shake it off!” to smaller doses thereof...

Unblocking stuck places, is probably the closest we come to writing ourselves into the Book of Life, by bringing more life into each moment. Let’s do a reflection on this together, which is Rosh Hashanah liturgy distilled into 1 minute of meditation:

Reflect on the grandeur of Creation—think Big Bang, the 7 days of Creation or stages of evolution of life on this planet alone, teeming with life, millions of species. Got the dinosaurs? The sequoias? The bees, God help them?

Now bring in the solar system and the nature of our relationships with the sun that sustains all plant life on this planet and provides the light and heat and by which we count the years... and as it is a star, a sweet local one, now include the billions of stars visible in the cosmos, our limited time on the planet, for 3 minutes. (close your eyes and let it sink in... 20 sec) That was created by God, this day...

Now reflect that God created you, you among millions but you are no less unique or miraculous than Adam, that first male-female human prototype created this day (Rosh Hashanah according to the Talmud may be the anniversary of the 6th day when humans were created, and it is our human nature that we consider this day). You have untold potential. When you save a life, you have saved an entire world; you are a world saver; and your kind words may have saved a life before... the way you walk through the world may be with lovingkindness that sustains life here.

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And were someone to save you, our Sages taught, it would be as though they saved a whole world. For so much potential courses through you—for love, for insight, for creativity and empathy—that you are a veritable world. Your tenderness enables you to feel empathy for others, so even though it really, really hurts and makes you feel small.... It is part of the world inside of you, the glimpse of an infinite God that you carry in the world.

Now look at the world from above—see your home and relationships, your city, your country, all the countries. Look at the oceans, think with pollution, hear the strife, the cries of orphans, see the wreckage of bombs, the ravages of war, hunger, indifference, look at the conditions of the elderly, children, women, minorities in every country (sometimes Christians afflicted, sometimes Jews, sometimes Muslims, sometimes, Buddhists). Look at bullying, see it in the prisons rife with unfulfilled potential and the addiction centers where unfulfilled needs contorted into dependencies on substances.

Look at the pesticide clouds and the color of the water in certain neighborhoods of the country because this is the day of the year when we are called to reckon for all of those things. *This is not a Bernie Sanders commercial. Or a Greenpeace pitch.* We know that the stockbrokers are as existentially unhappy as we are, and we are all taking stock internally today. Rosh Hashanah is an equalizer that way.

Zoom back in and see the ecosystem within you and the way it carries the pain of the blockages in the world. The misgivings about some humans, the shutting off of the compassion flow for some problems because we have compassion fatigue and we are overstressed, taxed by our own problems, protected by our judgments, stuck in limitations that feel fine; thank you very much. And just sit with that for a minute.

Now feel into the infinite love you are capable of, and when you have felt that. Think of your talents (for problem-solving, cooking, making music, teaching, listening with empathy, encouraging people, humor, reaching high places, budgeting, sewing, finding the right words, including people, connecting with animals, caring, remembering special days... your personal list of gifts is longer than what I could name) and feel in your fave, your heart, your kishkes, what it

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has been like when you have shared that for the purpose of helping someone. You have uplifted the world. And remember what it was like to receive help when you needed it.

And imagine that your giving and receiving was all the time flowing... What a wonderful world it would be? The news would be entirely different... the world would be in technicolor.

Now zoom out to God's view. Now back to yours. Say, "God, you are awesome. Thank you for giving me so much potential, God. I get it. I forgot. Please remember my ancestors, and I will remember, too. I will try to do better. Please give me a chance. Please give all of us the support we need to fulfill the infinite potential you have implanted in us. And keep that flow of lovingkindness that you have never let stop, flowing through me. L'shanah tovah."

That's it. Rosh Hashanah in 3 minutes.

The question Rosh Hashanah poses to us, is: Doesn't Life seem too short for us to tolerate the blockage of *hessed*? Isn't each person is too valuable to be compromised by stuckness. Doesn't protecting our egos from the discomfort of shift seems a poor substitutes for rich relationship?

On Rosh Hashanah—and hopefully over the course of the past month, leading up to it—we gather to do a spiritual tune-up to clear the blockage in the world. We reflect on our mortality to put our finite ego in perspective: we are channels of infinite lovingkindness, if we can get out of the way. Part of getting out of the way entails getting past our fear of not being enough. The Day of Judgment is not meant to scare us into a defense strategy. Our tradition is not about proving that we are guiltless. Far from it. It is about holding up the poles of our best selves and our shadow side and restoring the flow between these so that we can get centered in an honest appraisal of our inclinations and failings... and realign.

In today's Torah reading we see Sarah and Hagar, Avraham-the-kind-father and Avraham the witless, seemingly heartless father. We sense the pain that results from narrow seeing of our own concerns in entitlement and indifference to others. The Torah reading even renders the potentially embarrassing effect of associating the "kol" the cry, the voice that God heeds, recalling the sound of the shofar we ask God to heed, with Ishmael, the child our ancestors abandoned.

We have a shadow side, the Rabbis remind us with this Torah reading. We are not alone in our failures to be compassionate at critical moments. And this story both reminds us of that and of the

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consequences of our unresolved failures, generations down the line... it reminds us too that if all we see is the dark side of another person, we are probably not seeing the whole picture.

In the very beginning of the Talmud, the Sages asked, “What does God pray? — R. Zutra bar Tobi said in the name of Rav: 'May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice'. In other words, God acknowledges having two sides, too, and says, let me not get carried away with being right... let me be kind.

As this year finds us in increasingly polarizing debates, rigid positions, and fixed stances that are driving our country apart—that is the humanity across this continent—it is vital that we tap into *hessed*. Regardless of how the election turns out in a month (God help us), there will be healing that needs to take place between communities, between people, in politics, and in our patterns of communication.

An essence of lovingkindness that sustains the world, according to our Creation story, is that it flows from the Garden of Eden, the source, to all men and women, children and elderly, friends and strangers, and all aspects of the natural world. It courses through communication... unless it's stuck, and stuck would be... not good. Entrenching ourselves in habits of mind or of practice, resisting change, resisting openness, resisting each other, speaking in exclamation marks rather than question marks—seals us off from one another and from our own ability to evolve.

This echoes the challenge Maimonides counseled for Rosh Hashanah—that we hold ourselves in suspension between two extremes and pendulate between them, seeing ourselves as somewhere in between righteousness and moral failure. For truth is in the middle somewhere, and it moves. We must apply that to others, too.

This is the oscillation that Mencahem Mendel of Kotsk modeled for us, walking through the world with a scroll of paper in each pocket—on one written the words, “I am nothing but dust and ashes,” on the other written, “how do I know but that the world was created for me?” and he would read them to deflate his ego or to uplift his self-esteem, as needed. We need to apply that to others, too.

The Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev was known for doing this. Imagine applying it to someone whose values differ from yours... One Tisha B'Av the Rebbe of Berdichov came accross an obviously non-observant Jew who was eating (or by some accounts, smoking on Shabbat).

"My child," the Rebbe said, "You must certainly have forgotten that today is Tisha B'Av, a fast day."

"No, I did not forget," the man replied. "I know it is Tisha B'Av," continuing to eat.

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"Ah, then, you certainly have not been feeling well, and you are under doctors orders not to fast today," the Rebbe said.

"I am perfectly healthy," the man said, "And I have nothing to do with doctors."

The Berdichover lifted his face toward heaven. "Look, Ribono Shel Olam, how truthful and honest Your children are. I have offered the man opportunities to explain away his behavior, but he insists on telling the truth even to his own hurt. He knows how much You value truth, and he will not divert from it. Who else would be so loyal to your principals?"

It is so easy and so technically justifiable to block up hessed, sometimes, that we are naturally tempted. But small stoppages can become beaver dams, blocking up the rivers of understanding and kindness that need to flow from Eden. This Rosh Hashanah, the fate of the world seems to hang in the balance, all the more so as we gather in this “swing” state, under the mazal, the constellation that Sages saw when they looked into the night sky at this time of year—the Libra, the set of scales in which justice seems to hang in the balance. Will the world tilt this year towards Eden?

While naturally, I’m deeply worried about the election, I’m also deeply worried for our country after the election, regardless of the results. The deep divides in the fabric of our society, which have come to our attention over the course of the past year, will not disappear after the election. And they are cause for worry.

On Rosh Hashanah, however, as we reckon with the state of our soul and of the world, we are reminded that we have an infinite resource to tap. *Hessed* is life-sustaining creativity, compassion, and deeds of lovingkindness—is *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, *tzedakkah*.

The world needs *hessed* to survive. And while the coming election may decide whether or not it flows in this country, it is not the determinant of whether it flows or not through us.

During these days of Awe, **we choose** whether we are written in the Book of Life or not. We choose whether we inscribe on the cosmic ballot *that is our own life*, whether the world is written in the Book of Life-sustaining kindness. Spoiler alert: All of liturgy urges the unfurling of every leaf inside of us, choose life, choose life, choose life.

L’shanah tovah tikateivu. May we be written in the Book of Life.